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ABSTRACT

To evaluate the effectiveness of special education resources in Rhode Island school districts, a self-study guide was completed by two districts and an effectiveness study performed in six other districts. The six district study gathered survey data from parents, resource teachers, and regular educators and analyzed program and performance data from student records. Results included that two-thirds of the parents reported good or very good progress in their child, that five out of six regular educators believed in the effectiveness of the special education resource program, and that resource teachers claimed that approximately one-third of the resource students were achieving a high rate of progress. Analysis further revealed that teacher caseload was significantly related to parent opinion on the effectiveness of the program and that class size was correlated with students' test performance. Findings were also reported regarding program cost and program effectiveness (including that students in high cost programs made stronger educational gains per year than students in low cost programs), communication and recent training. (CL)

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REPORT ON THE RHODE ISLAND PROJECT TO EVALUATE SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCE PROGRAMS

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Rhode Island Department of Education
Evaluation Unit

February, 1984

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PRINCIPAL OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
RESOURCE PROGRAM EVALUATION PROJECT

- Including the initial design phase, eleven special education directors in Rhode Island were actively involved in one or more phases of the resource program evaluation project. Districts involved in the project were Barrington, Bristol, Central Falls, Coventry, East Greenwich, East Providence, North Providence, Smithfield, Tiverton, West Warwick and Woonsocket. Cooperation from the special education directors involved was excellent throughout the project.

- Although a self-study evaluation guide has been prepared, experience suggests that meaningful evaluations will be difficult for some districts with limited staff and technical resources. In these situations an evaluation consultant and/or an evaluation assistant would be highly desirable. Arrangements should be considered for technical or financial assistance to support evaluation efforts.

- It cannot be assumed that special education students have comparable, longitudinal performance scores available to support a program evaluation. School districts should be encouraged to systematically record comparable performance information for all students in special education programs. The performance information should be comparable, longitudinally, for each student: a variety of assessment methods would be allowable, depending on the disabilities of students.

- There is a large variation in the so-called excess cost per pupil for special education resource programs. These differences reflect significant variations in factors such as average resource room class size and average instructional time per week for students. Data from this evaluation project suggest that student progress is better in higher cost districts. Further inquiry should be made into reasons for the high variation which occurs in the cost of resource programs.

- Many resource teachers feel that their caseloads or average class sizes are too large. This evaluation provides data to support the contention that high class sizes or caseloads (on an FTE basis) are correlated with lower program effectiveness. A regulation should be considered to prevent class sizes or caseloads that are undesirably high.

- Communication between regular and special education staffs appears to be relatively weak in the secondary grades. Communication among resource teachers to share teaching methods and other specialized knowledge appears to be relatively weak in the elementary grades. Procedures should be developed to allow for more communication at all grade levels.

- Many regular education teachers feel that they have not been adequately trained to provide instruction to students who have learning disabilities. Additional training efforts are needed to improve the relevant knowledge and skills of regular education teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gratitude is expressed to the following nine Rhode Island school districts which were actively involved in the Resource Program Evaluation Project--Barrington, Bristol, Central Falls, Coventry, East Greenwich, Smithfield, Tiverton, West Warwick and Woonsocket. The special education directors and staffs of these districts provided information and support that were essential for a successful project. Additional consultation was provided by James McEneaney, Barbara Metcalf, Allen Mongeau, and Susan Villani who served as members of the project's advisory committee.

Special thanks are due to Karen Thomas of the New England Regional Resource Center (NERRC) for her consultation and to NERRC for providing supplementary financial assistance for the project. Consultants to the project included Dr. Richard Dickson, Dr. John DiMeo, Ms. Judith DiMeo, Dr. Jennifer Greene, and Ms. Nancy Rieser. Special assistance in the self-study pilot projects was provided by Lois Battles of the Barrington School Department and Maureen Shunney of the Central Falls School Department.

The project was executed by the Evaluation Unit of the Rhode Island Department of Education with consultation from the Department's special education staff. This report was prepared by Dr. James P. Karon, who served as overall project manager.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Special education resource programs in Rhode Island are effective based upon this evaluation of a sample of programs. Resource students are making performance gains that are equivalent to what would be expected from a general national sample of all students.

- Parents express a high level of satisfaction with special education resource programs.

- Regular education teachers report that about 70 percent of resource students show clear benefits from the resource program.

- Evidence indicates that students make better progress when they attend resource rooms with small class sizes.

- Districts in the study showed considerable variation in average class size for resource instruction and in special instructional time per week for students.

- Evidence indicates that student progress is better in higher cost resource programs.

- Regular education teachers rate the effectiveness of resource programs higher when there is good communication between special and regular education staffs.

- There is need for additional training for regular education teachers regarding the instruction of special education students.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Having spent considerable time monitoring the full implementation of special education services as specified in state and federal regulations, special education staff at the Rhode Island Department of Education felt that a broader evaluation of special education programs was advisable to ensure that implemented programs were indeed effective. Therefore, a project was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of special education resource programs. Part-time resource programs were chosen for this evaluation project because this is the most frequent service type to which students are assigned.

The project had two overriding goals:--to test the feasibility of evaluating a sample of resource programs, and to develop a guidebook to assist local school districts in the evaluation of their own special education programs. This report will present findings related to the first goal. However, a brief introduction to the self-study guide is included below.

The self-study guide is a 36-page guide, plus appendices, intended to define evaluation concepts and the sequence of steps a school district must go through to achieve an effective evaluation. It is broadly applicable to all types of special education programs, although it was designed primarily from experience with special education resource programs. The table of contents from the self-study guide is duplicated in Figure 1 to provide an indication of the guide's contents.

The self-study guide is in a state of testing and refinement. Improvements may be made in the future as a selected group of school districts gains experience in the use of the guide. A principal issue to be evaluated is

Figure 1

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SELF-STUDY GUIDE FOR THE EVALUATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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the degree to which school districts can complete meaningful local evaluations relying principally upon their own staff. Although the guide is intended as a self-study activity, some school districts may be unable to achieve an effective evaluation without external assistance. Copies of A Self-Study Guide for the Evaluation of Special Education Programs are available, in limited quantity, from the Rhode Island Department of Education, Special Education Program Unit, 22 Hayes Street, Providence, RI 02908.

From Fall, 1982 through Fall, 1983, eight Rhode Island school districts participated in activities related to the evaluation of special education resource programs. Two districts performed a self-study of their resource programs under the guidance of a special working committee of state and local staff, and an external consultant. The charge of this committee was to gain experience in the implementation of self-evaluation efforts which would enhance the value and utility of a self-study guide. The resulting guide was based upon knowledge gained through these pilot experiences, upon previous research and documents of other state agencies (particularly North Carolina, Massachusetts and Illinois) and upon experience in what was called the "six district study", as described below.

Six Rhode Island school districts participated in a state centered evaluation of special education resource programs. The purposes of this "six district study" were to develop data gathering instruments and procedures, to explore the measurement of program effectiveness and, if effectiveness could be measured, to investigate whether teacher caseload size, cost per pupil, teacher-teacher communication, teacher-parent communication and teacher inservice training might be related to program effectiveness.

Both sub-projects were guided by a fourteen member advisory committee representing a variety of constituents external to the Rhode Island Department

of Education. The advisory committee met approximately monthly for a twelve-month period, providing advice on plans, instrument development, evaluation design and data interpretation.

II. GENERAL DESIGN OF THE SIX DISTRICT STUDY

The six district study was a research/evaluation project to measure the program effectiveness of special education resource programs and to investigate the relationship of program effectiveness to teacher caseload size, cost per pupil, teacher-teacher communication, parent-teacher communication, and teacher inservice training. To achieve these objectives, survey data were gathered from parents, resource teachers, and regular education teachers, and performance and program data were provided from student records. The project was fairly extensive in scope, involving a sample of about 400 students and their associated parents and teachers.

The six districts selected for the study were selected on the basis of two criteria:--(a) variation in cost per pupil (three high cost and three low cost) and (b) desire to participate. It was agreed that the analysis would be a statistical analysis of groups, rather than a district-specific analysis. Thus, results do not critique specific programs, nor can they be generalized to state averages. Instead, the study was designed to explore the measurement of program effectiveness and to perform an analysis of program variables in relation to program effectiveness.

About 400 students were sampled for inclusion in the study. The evaluation included students in the grade range two through twelve. Younger students were not included because it was less likely that they would have pre-test and post-test results based on the same assessment instrument. At the elementary level (grades 2-6), students were randomly sampled from the caseloads of three resource teachers in each of the six districts. These

teachers were nominated by special education directors with the intent of providing some variety in classroom situations. At the secondary level, (grades 7-12), students were sampled on a completely random basis. Sample sizes were approximately equal in each of the six participating districts. Students receiving only monitoring rather than instruction, students new to the program and students receiving only speech therapy were not included in the study.

Each district provided program and performance data for each of the sampled students. Information was received for 90 percent of the students in the sample. In addition, nearly 90 percent of resource teachers and nearly 80 percent of regular education teachers who received survey forms returned them. All resource teachers in the six districts were included in the study. One regular education teacher (nominated by a resource teacher) was surveyed for each student. Finally, parents of all students in the sample received a mail survey and provided a 68 percent response rate. All response rates are considered to be satisfactory to support generalizations.

Student, parent and teacher data were interrelated through the use of anonymous student identification numbers. The study also included a survey for a sample of principals and personal interviews with each of the elementary level resource teachers from whose caseloads the elementary sample was drawn.

III. THE MEASUREMENT OF PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

As a direct measure of program effectiveness, an attempt was made to measure the performance gains of students while they were receiving services from the special education resource program. For all students in the study, resource teachers were asked to submit a current educational performance measure, as well as a previous educational performance measure using the same assessment instrument. Previous testing was accepted anywhere in the interval of five to thirty-six months prior to recent testing, although the average testing interval was about fourteen months. Teachers were asked to provide test data in the academic area to which most instructional resource time was devoted.

Data satisfying these specifications were available for 171 students, about half of the sample for whom student data forms had been returned. On the basis of this sample, it is concluded that students in special education resource programs make annual academic progress equal to the progress of a random, national sample of students. In other words, students in resource programs were no longer losing ground academically--they were, on average, learning at a rate equivalent to the national norm. This finding holds true for both elementary and secondary level students. It is felt that this rate of progress supports the conclusion that special education resource programs are effective.

In addition to this testing-based measure of effectiveness, other subjective measures of program effectiveness were available from survey replies. These indicators yielded the following results.

- Only five percent of parents are not satisfied with the special education program recommended for their child.
- Two-thirds of parents see good or very good progress in their child.
- Parents feel that the special education resource program has improved the self-image of four out of every five students in the program.
- Five out of six regular education teachers surveyed believe that the special education resource program is an effective program.
- Regular education teachers report that the special education program has been moderately or exceptionally helpful to seven out of ten students under their instruction.
- Regular education teachers feel that the amount of special education service time provided is adequate for about seven out of ten students under their instruction.
- According to resource teachers, about one-third of resource students are achieving a high rate of progress. Close to one in four students is making a low level of progress.

A final source of evidence on the effectiveness of resource programs is provided by parent comments which were added to their survey returns. Written comments were received from about one-half of the parents who replied and their comments indicate very strong support for the special education program. Out of a sample of 260 returned parent surveys, only about 20 parents mentioned a significant criticism or problem with the special education program. Most of the problems raised, such as a child being identified too late, or that resource teachers were sometimes used inappropriately to substitute in regular classrooms, still implied a belief in the value of special education services.

IV. TEACHER CASELOAD, CLASS SIZE AND PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Objectives of the six district study included examining the relationship of teacher caseload to program effectiveness. In the course of examining this relationship, it becamse apparent that class size should be considered as a related or intervening variable.

For the 56 resource teachers included in this study, the average number of students receiving instruction from each teacher was 28. The average teacher caseload at the elementary level was 26; the average teacher caseload at the secondary level was 33. In addition, some students were monitored or received the benefits of teacher-teacher consultation without receiving direct instruction from a resource teacher. The average for all resource teachers was an additional five students in a monitoring/consultation status.

Neither state nor federal regulations set a numerical limit for the caseload size of resource teachers. Therefore, there has been some concern over the possibility of inappropriately high caseload sizes. When resource teachers were asked to add general comments to their survey form, the issue of class size/teacher caseload was clearly dominant. In the interviews with elementary level resource teachers, ten out of eighteen teachers interviewed felt that they were working at a caseload level past the point where teaching effectiveness starts to become reduced. Elementary resource teachers felt, on an average, that this point was a caseload of 23 students. Optimal caseload size was judged to be about 19 students.

Most of the teachers interviewed felt that the average number of students per classroom session (average classroom size) was more relevant than total caseload size. Because students are seen for a fractional portion of the week, a large caseload can, in theory, be associated with small

classes and a small total full-time equivalent (FTE) student caseload. The average instructional time per week in the resource program is four hours per week for elementary students and about four and one-half hours per week for secondary students, but the range of instructional time provided is wide and varies significantly by district.

The average class size during resource room sessions was four students at the elementary level and seven students at the secondary level. Class size rarely exceeded nine students at the elementary level, but exceeded nine students for about 30 percent of the secondary students. The maximum class size was fourteen.

Through the linkage of the various surveys, resource teacher caseload could be compared with the opinions of parents and regular education teachers regarding the effectiveness of the resource program for the specific students in the sample. Teacher caseload was significantly related to parent opinion on the effectiveness of the program. In addition, for regular education teachers, lower effectiveness was reported in situations where students had resource teachers with high caseload sizes. Teacher caseload, however, was not correlated with student performance as measured by test data.

This fact led to a consideration of class size which turned out to be correlated with students' test performance. Students attending resource rooms with small class sizes make stronger performance gains per year than students attending resource rooms with larger class sizes. Class size was also correlated with opinion of regular education teachers on the effectiveness of the resource program for specific students, although it was not correlated with the comparable opinions of parents.

In conclusion, there appears to be evidence that the average class size of the resource room is correlated with student performance. Teacher caseload is correlated with at least the perception of student progress held by parents

and regular education teachers. One relevant fact may be that regular education teachers have much less frequent communication with resource teachers when resource teacher caseloads are high. The study, however, did not find any evidence that interaction with parents varies according to teacher caseload.

V. PROGRAM COST AND PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

The sampling design for the six district study included three districts with relatively high per pupil costs for resource programs and three districts with relatively low per pupil costs for resource programs. Technically, the variable used was additional per pupil cost beyond the system-wide per pupil cost for educational programs, excluding special education services. This additional per pupil cost was about twice as high, on average, in the three high cost districts.

Although it might be assumed that high cost programs are high cost because they maintain low teacher caseloads, this turned out not to be true. The high cost districts had an average teacher caseload of 31 students, whereas the low cost districts had an average teacher caseload of 21 students. There was, however, a major difference in the average amount of instructional time students received per week in high cost vs. low cost districts. Students in high cost districts in this study received resource instruction for seven percent of the school program per week. Students in low cost districts received resource instruction for an average of twenty-one percent of the school program per week.

In essence, teachers in high cost districts in this study had larger total teacher caseloads, but teachers saw each student for a small proportion of the week. Teachers in low cost districts had smaller caseloads, but students were seen almost three times as often as they were in high cost districts. This combination of teacher caseloads and instructional time resulted in a "full-time equivalent" teacher caseload that was about twice as high in low cost districts as in high cost districts. In addition, average class size in low cost districts was seven, whereas average class size in high cost districts was four. Thus, it can be concluded that the high cost districts provided

small resource class sizes and a low full-time equivalent student load on teachers, whereas low cost districts maintained higher class sizes and larger full-time equivalent student loads on teachers. On the other hand, low cost districts did provide more classroom time per week per student. The ratio of professional support staff to total students was about equal in both types of districts.

With these complexities in mind, the following findings were obtained:

- Students in high cost programs made stronger educational gains per year than students in low cost programs.
- Students in low cost districts were further behind expected grade level than students in high cost districts.
- Regular education teachers in low cost districts were less satisfied with the amount of cooperation and joint planning that existed between regular education and special education teachrs.
- Resource teachers in high cost districts spent more time providing advice on instructional methods to other teachers.
- High cost and low cost programs did not differ in terms of parent satisfaction with the resource program.
- Resource teachers in low cost districts were less satisfied than resource teachers in high cost districts with the availability of assessment and other materials needed to run a good program.

VI. COMMUNICATION, RECENT TRAINING AND PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

(a) Communication

When special education teachers, regular education teachers and parents communicate effectively, there should be a clearer common understanding of the student's program and of the methods and strategies to be used in helping the student to overcome his or her disabilities. The six district study included questions on communication patterns and allowed for an analysis of communication in relation to program effectiveness.

Eighty-five percent of parents attended the last IEP (individualized education program) meeting relating to their child's program and about seven out of eight of those parents considered their participation to be meaningful at the meeting. Meaningful participation at the IEP meeting was correlated with the parents' opinions on how well their children were doing in the resource program. In addition, parents who receive regular communication from the resource teacher and parents who receive follow-up instructional materials for use at home have more positive opinions on the effectiveness of the program.

Parent participation at the IEP meeting and communication between parents and resource teachers did not correlate with test score gains. Therefore, the conservative conclusion to be drawn is that good communication between teachers and parents correlates with parental opinion that their children are making good progress based on the resource program.

In a similar vein, regular education teachers who report frequent meetings and good cooperative planning with resource teachers are much more likely to consider the resource program to be beneficial for the students whom they teach, although there was no measured effect between communication and test scores. One might argue, alternatively, that teacher opinion is a more

sensitive measure of student progress than test scores, or that communication promotes stronger understanding and more generalized support and confidence in the resource program among regular education teachers.

Resource teachers who reported meeting frequently with regular education teachers were more likely to have students who made large performance gains in terms of test scores, except for the group of teachers reporting communication "several times per week." In other words, performance was better when teachers communicated about once per week in contrast to every four weeks or less, but apparently for students where almost daily communication was required, performance progress was more difficult to attain.

It is useful to add that comments from many secondary level teachers, in particular, indicated that resource programs could be improved with more communication between regular and special education teachers. In terms of communication among special education staff, that appears to be more of a problem at the elementary level than at the secondary level. Based on both survey replies and interviews, it would appear that some elementary level resource teachers feel isolated and could benefit from more opportunities to share information and ideas with other resource teachers.

(b) Recent Training

Another factor examined for its possible influence on program effectiveness was teacher training. Among resource teachers in the six study districts, over the past three years about two-thirds had received some for-credit training in special education not sponsored by their school district, about one-fifth had received credit eligible inservice training and about one-third had received non-credit inservice training. (Several teachers received training in more than one category). There was a marginal relationship supporting the statement that the amount of recent training in special education is correlated with student performance as judged by resource teachers.

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Regular education teachers were asked about special education inservice training over the past two years. Three-fourths of elementary level teachers and over one-half of secondary level teachers reported that such training had not been offered. In those cases where inservice training had been offered, over half of the teachers had not attended. This is somewhat discouraging because about 40 percent of regular education teachers reported that they did not feel that they had been adequately trained to teach special education students within the regular classroom program. This is particularly important because there is a strong relationship between the opinion of regular education teachers as to whether they have been adequately trained and the judgment of these same teachers on whether their students are benefiting from the resource program.

Recent training for regular education or resource teachers did not correlate with students' test scores. Nevertheless, the above finding suggests that recent special education training has an impact on how teachers perceive the special education program. If one takes the opinion that teacher judgment is a more sensitive indicator of student progress than standardized test scores, then one might draw the conclusion that recent teacher training does contribute to program effectiveness.

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VII. OTHER FINDINGS

(a) Amount of Service; Setting for Instruction

The amount of service received by students in the resource program varies from two hours or less per week for about one-third of students, to six hours or more per week for about one-fourth of students. Resource instruction is usually always provided in a resource room with other special education students.

(b) Contact Between Student and Teacher

On average, a student's time in the resource room is about evenly split among receiving one-to-one instruction, receiving group instruction, and having work time without instruction. For elementary level students, group instruction is a little more prevalent and for secondary students, working alone is a little more prevalent.

(c) Principal Method of Teaching

Remediation of specific handicaps is the primary teaching method at the elementary level. Tutoring and "strategies of compensation" are often used, but much less frequently as a primary method. At the secondary level, remediation and tutoring are both in use as primary teaching methods, but tutoring is the primary method twice as often.

(d) Full Content vs. Supplemental Instruction

About 4 in 10 children receive full content instruction in at least one subject area from a resource teacher. Typically, at the elementary level these students are assigned to the resource room during the period when a certain subject area is being taught in the regular classroom. There was some concern among elementary teachers interviewed that when children were assigned in this manner they may arrive in a resource room comprised of students who are at various levels of achievement and who need help in

different subject areas. In certain situations, a supplemental service (rather than full responsibility for a subject area) may be more flexible and may allow for better groupings of students and more individualized time durations.

(e) Role and Satisfaction of Principals

From the survey of principals, it was determined that principals take on a variety of roles with respect to the special education program. Some principals are heavily involved; others delegate most responsibility. Principals were generally satisfied with their role in the referral and placement process and with the general opportunity they have for input into the special education program.

(f) Regular Education Experience; Facilities

Elementary level resource teachers in this study were much more likely than secondary level resource teachers to have previously been regular education teachers (61 percent versus 22 percent). On another issue, one-third of the resource teachers in the study considered resource program facilities to be no better than borderline.

(g) Insufficient Time to Complete All Duties

Finally, during the interviews of elementary level resource teachers, the majority of the teachers reported that planned observation or consulting time was often impossible to fulfill because of instructional and/or assessment demands. Yet, most of the teachers seem to prefer a schedule that includes an appropriate balance of several roles including instructor, consultant, observer and assessor.